

V

HERMAN MELVILLE AND THE
PROBLEM OF EVIL

HERMAN MELVILLE needs, I hope, no introduction. His position as one of the most important American writers of the nineteenth century has been pretty well established since the Melville revival of the 1920's; my own belief that he had the most interesting mind among American writers of the century is the sort of personal opinion that can never be proved.

His work has been studied from many directions, but today I should like to look at it from a direction that, I believe, still remains untried. I propose to examine his prose work in its relation to a philosophical concept, the problem of evil. This approach seems to me to place him in his proper light, not simply as a master teller of sea tales, but in the line of the great tragic poets, the serious writers who concern themselves with the central problems of man's destiny. I believe that Herman Melville is perhaps the only nineteenth century American novelist who belongs in this group.

But what is the problem of evil? And why is evil a problem? Perhaps the simplest way to make clear just what the problem of evil is, since a problem is after all a question, is to quote a series of questions from Professor Radoslav Tsanoff's *The Nature of Evil*. Dr. Tsanoff points out that the words *optimism* and *pessimism* in general refer to "estimates of the world and of human life which are dominantly approving or condemnatory. Philosophically a double problem of evil re-

sults. The pessimist asks: What is the ultimate nature of this evil and miserable world, and is there any way out of this woe? The optimist: Why should this fundamentally good and perfect world include any evil, and how can we acquiesce in it loyally and wholeheartedly?"¹ This, then, is the basic problem, one which every philosophical system, every theology must sooner or later face. I am aware, of course, that there are many problems of evil, not merely *the* problem; here I use the term for the whole complex of issues raised by a consideration of the source and nature of evil.

It is a *serious* problem. If one's sole interest in life is essentially frivolous—that is, if he is concerned only with collecting material things, to the neglect of the things that do not rust—if one is essentially frivolous, he can go through life without meeting the problem of evil. But if one has the intellectual curiosity to ask *why* about the more permanent things in human life, he eventually meets the problem of evil. Herman Melville did, and he wrestled with it for half a century.

Melville was born in New York in 1819, the son of Alan Melville, a fairly well-to-do importer, and Maria Gansevoort, of Dutch patroon stock. With his early life, we have no concern here, except to note that he was indoctrinated with the Dutch Reformed brand of Calvinism. After his father's death and the collapse of his business reduced the family to near-poverty, young Herman drifted into various unproductive occupations. Finally at seventeen he shipped before the mast on a merchantman for Liverpool. One voyage was enough to disillusion him with forecandle life and to give him a first-hand acquaintance with the dockside slums and the human suffering and cruelty that they harbored. Three years of drifting followed; then again he took to sea, this

Melville and the Problem of Evil 83

time on a whaler bound for the South Pacific. In several books he has told us of the tyranny and brutality that drove him to desert the whaler six months later on a tropical island; of the ravages that Christian civilization, as represented by missionaries, French colonial government, and venereal disease, had made upon the noble savages of the islands; of the merciless flogging and the attitude it bred aboard the man-of-war on which he finally returned to the United States, nearly three years after he had sailed. With the confidence born of having seen wonders rare to most Americans he somehow slipped into authorship and wrote *Typee*, his first book, published in 1846.

Typee is apparently a fairly truthful account of Melville's own adventures on the island of Nukahiva. *Typee* tells how Melville, or a young man like him, disgusted with the monotony of sea life after six months out of sight of land, bored with the diet of salt-horse and mouldy sea-biscuit, and indignant at the brutality of the captain, jumped ship at Nukahiva and with a comrade fled to the interior until the ship was gone. It tells of his life there for several months among the natives, of the joys of life on a tropical island among the noble savages, of his growing discontent and fear of cannibalism, of his escape to another whaler that put into the bay for water. *Typee* is a rather remarkable first book, and there are many things in it that merit discussion; however we today are concerned only with traces of the problem of evil. In *Typee* I believe that we can see Melville's almost unconscious record of his own growing awareness of the problem.

Now *Typee* occupies an interesting place in the record of Melville's development. A first book is always revealing, and *Typee* comes at an especially crucial period in Melville's life. He had just completed his college education; "a whale-

ship," he says in *Moby Dick*, "was my Yale College and my Harvard." On the other hand, what we may call his adult education, his ransacking of libraries in search of the answers to the questions that had begun to plague him, had just begun. In his thirty-first year he writes to his confidant, Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself."² It was in his twenty-fifth year that he returned from the South Seas; *Typee* appeared two years later.

I believe, therefore, that we will not be far wrong in expecting to find in *Typee* the first record of the problems that were to concern Melville for the remainder of his life. In fixing in the matrix of print his fantastic experiences in the Marquesas, one thing especially seems to have caught the mind of Melville. This was a paradox. How did it happen that civilization, with all of the implications of physical and spiritual improvement that accompany the word, brought to the primitive natives only disease and degradation?

He writes:

Alas for the poor savages when exposed to the influence of these polluting examples! Unsophisticated and confiding, they are easily led into every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruin thus remorselessly inflicted upon them by European civilisers. Thrice happy are they who, inhabiting some yet undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean, have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man.³

Now Melville had read Rousseau, and his attitude is no doubt in part a product of the traditional primitivistic concept of the noble savage, but his feeling in *Typee* is more than a conventional literary attitude. One is constantly aware in reading the book that the author is profoundly shocked by the fact that what ought to be good is evil. To say that he is

Melville and the Problem of Evil 85

aware of the problem of evil in its philosophical sense at this time would be an exaggeration, but his experience had plainly led him to ask some questions, and his subsequent conduct shows that he was unwilling to rest until he had found some answers.

One implication of the paradox especially concerned him, with his orthodox religious background; he discovered that the missionaries in the South Seas, who should, according to all of his previous teaching, have represented the best that Christian civilization had to offer, were the source of almost as much evil as the other representatives of the outside world. He concludes:

The term 'savage' is, I conceive, often misapplied, and indeed when I consider the vices, cruelties, and enormities of every kind that spring up in the tainted atmosphere of a feverish civilisation, I am inclined to think that so far as the relative wickedness of the parties is concerned, four or five Marquesan islanders sent to the United States as missionaries might be quite as useful as an equal number of Americans dispatched to the islands in a similar capacity.⁴

Thus, his attention was focussed on an aspect of the paradox that was to lead to the heart of the problem of evil—What was the relation of the organized church to evil? He was not far from the search for a theodicy that was to come soon—Why does God himself allow evil to exist?

Omoo, his next book, a continuation of the adventures described in *Typee*, reflects the same general position and need not concern us here. *Mardi*, however, published in 1849, is quite a different book. The germinative forces were working furiously, and the plant was luxuriant and formless. *Mardi* begins as a straight-forward romance of adventure, then turns suddenly into a bewildering historical, political, religious, and philosophical allegory. It is a fascinating puzzle of a book, but for our purposes this afternoon we can examine only one or two points.

Here is the story, told in the first person by Taji, the central character: Off the coasts of an unknown archipelago in the western Pacific Taji and two companions rescue a mysterious white girl, Yillah, from a group of natives, after killing the priest who was taking her to be sacrificed. With Yillah the rescuers go ashore on one of the islands, where Taji is received as a demigod by the inhabitants. Soon, however, Yillah, with whom Taji has fallen in love, is recaptured by the followers of the old priest. Taji, accompanied by various people, most notably a king, a historian, a philosopher, and a poet, sets out on a search for her through the islands of *Mardi*, the archipelago. They visit islands which represent allegorically various religious and philosophical systems, other islands which represent Britain, America, and other countries. Throughout their voyage they are pursued by three sons of the dead priest, seeking revenge, and three maidens, emissaries of Hautia, a dark queen who seeks the love of Taji. Finally, Taji, having left the others behind, goes to his death in the swirling waters, still pursuing the elusive image of Yillah.

Upon this rather ridiculous framework the immature Melville, groping for a literary method, tried to hang all the philosophical and political speculations that were flooding his mind. *Mardi* is a very ragbag of mid-nineteenth century thought. What does it tell us about Melville's development?

In the first place, it, like so many of Melville's books, is an account of a sea voyage, and here the author develops a symbol that is to be central in *Moby Dick*. The land becomes a symbol of conformity, of ease, of intellectual sloth, of the Known; the sea, on the other hand, represents speculation, hardship, intellectual adventure, the Unknown. In a chapter of *Mardi* significantly called "Sailing On" this twin symbol of sea and land is used to make the most direct statement of

Melville and the Problem of Evil 87

what the book is about. "I've chartless voyaged," he writes. "With compass and the lead, we had not found these Mardian Isles. . . . Hug the shore, naught new is seen."⁵ Melville has here, in this intellectual voyage, put out into unfamiliar scenes of speculation. He goes on, in this passage, to speak of Columbus:

That voyager steered his bark through seas untracked before; ploughed his own path mid jeers; though with a heart that oft was heavy with the thought that he might only be too bold, and grope where land was none.

So I.

Now here is obviously a bit of youthful dramatization, but the fact remains that Melville *was*, in 1849, alone in seas unexplored by any other American novelist.

He continues:

But this new world here sought is stranger far than his, who stretched his vans from Palos. It is the world of mind; wherein the wanderer may gaze round, with more of wonder than Balboa's band roving through the golden Aztec glades.

But fiery yearning their own phantom-future make, and deem it present. So, if after all these fearful, fainting trances, the verdict be, the golden haven was not gained;—yet, in bold quest thereof, better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals; and give me, ye gods, an utter wreck, if wreck I do.

This passage is manifestly autobiographical. Thus, *Mardi* with its voyage, its quest, is in one sense a record of Melville's own mental and spiritual exploration. The "new world here sought" is "the world of mind," as he says, and in his quest he finds it "better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals." Although the sea may lead, as he says, to "nothing but a world of care and anxiety," it is infinitely preferable to burial in animal indolence. The fair Yillah, then, in *Mardi* is clearly some kind of ultimate good, and the fatal quest for her is a voyage of the mind in search of the answer to intellectual and spiritual problems.

In the subordinate allegory of the various islands which make up Mardi, the world, the problem of evil contends for place among many other problems, such as democratic government, but it is clear that Melville has by this time in his mental voyage thrown off his orthodox religious beliefs and that the basic paradox of good and evil is assuming more importance. He writes, "For evil is the chronic malady of the universe; and checked in one place, breaks forth in another." As the party proceeds, the debates follow the patterns of old arguments that echo down through the centuries. Here is a sample:

Well, Oro [that is, God] is everywhere. What now?

Then, if that be absolutely so, Oro is not merely a universal onlooker, but occupies and fills all space; and no vacancy is left for any being, or anything but Oro. Hence, Oro is *in* all things, and himself *is* all things—the time-old creed. But since evil abounds, and Oro is all things, then he cannot be perfectly good; wherefore, Oro's omnipresence and moral perfection seem incompatible.⁶

But these debates are inconclusive, Yillah still is unfound, and they become grave. Babbalanja, the philosopher, mourns, "Yillah still eludes us. In all this tour of Mardi how little have we found to fill the heart with peace: how much to slaughter all our yearnings."⁷ Evil is everywhere.

Here at last is the basic problem of evil. But a recapitulation of philosophical arguments does not make a moving work of art. The working of these basic themes into an effective novel was to come later. Melville had not yet acquired a concept of the essential nature of literary tragedy.

This is no place for a detailed discussion of the nature of tragedy; theories of tragedy are too numerous. Just as every philosopher must somewhere in his system take account of the problem of evil, so most philosophers are led to some consideration of the appeal and the nature of tragedy. For the two are kin. As Nietzsche said, "Banish evil, and it will

Melville and the Problem of Evil 89

go hard with the writers of tragedy," for evil is the very theme of tragedy. Because of this relationship I must pause here long enough to consider briefly just what tragedy is. The aspect of tragedy most pertinent to us this afternoon has been summarized by Philo Buck:

It was the Greek . . . who discovered a virtue in doubt, and a mental exhilaration in exploring the limitations of man's nature and the "antagonism that lies at the heart of the world." . . . It is this fundamental human paradox, man's aspirations and powers, his pitiful limitations and death, . . . that allowed room for the attitude we define as tragic. It is not his weakness alone, for then his fate, like that of a senseless beast, is only pathetic, if not irrelevant; it is not his strength alone, for then he is either a senseless boaster or a demigod.

Again, tragedy is essentially rebellion against the paradox of this human lot, the uprush of man's reason and will against the narrow confines of mortal destiny. . . . Man is not in a congenial world; the gods, the laws of nature, the ways of other men, the whole manner of life, are indifferent to the fate of the best and wisest. . . .

Out of this catastrophe that is human destiny, tragedy would, if it can, rescue some pattern and significance for human fate. Tragedy is an escape from the ills of life, but an escape not by shutting the doors and closing the ears against the uproar, but by vividly facing human destiny at its worst, challenging its malevolence, and gazing steadily at the heart of the pain in search for a human value. For the tragic possibilities lie within the nature of man himself, and are due to his ability to dare to protest against his destiny. Tragedy is rebellion with a conscious purpose, to rescue from the wreck something that man may yet cling to.⁸

Now Herman Melville had seen evil in Liverpool and on Pacific islands; he had even begun to speculate about its origin. He had apparently some conception of the importance of the tragic flaw, of the essential crack in the protagonist's armor that allows Fate, in modern tragedy, to pursue him; for in *Mardi* it is apparently Taji's blood guilt in killing the old priest that prevents him from finding Yillah and it is his own fatal determination that brings death to his two oldest companions and finally to himself. But the whole conflict

between Fate and the hero is never clear-cut. Melville does not yet seem to realize that the tragic protagonist must have a magnitude, a stature greater than that of Taji if his vain struggle against Fate is to move his audience. There is in *Mardi* little trace of "rebellion with a conscious purpose."

His contemporary audience, of course, expecting a sea story, missed the concern with evil and found *Mardi* merely a cloudy sort of romance, rather pleasant, but puzzling. His next two books, however, were what the public wanted, in spite of the evidence that Melville himself considered them merely pot-boilers. *Redburn* is a rather factual account of the author's first voyage before the mast to Liverpool and back. It is a sensitive, rather charming story of a boy's disillusionment, of his first contact with the evil in the world. In the light of Melville's later concern with the subject of this talk we can see his mind playing back over and illuminating his earlier experiences, only dimly understood at the time; but Melville seems to be deliberately reining in the urge to metaphysical speculation. He is concerned with specific evils—the starving poor of Liverpool, the horrible sanitary conditions on emigrant ships—rather than with the problem of evil. It is certainly just as well, for with a wife and a growing family he needed a book that would sell. He writes to a friend in December, 1849:

I did not see your say about the book 'Redburn,' which to my surprise (somewhat) seems to have been favorably received. I am glad of it, for it puts money into an empty purse. But I hope I shall never write such a book again.

Tho' when a poor devil writes with duns all around him, and looking over the back of his chair, and perching on his pen, and dancing in his ink-stand—like the devils about St. Anthony—what can you expect of that poor devil? What but a beggarly 'Redburn.'⁹

White Jacket, which followed immediately, was concerned with evil, but again only in a practical, reforming sort of way.

Melville and the Problem of Evil 91

An account of a voyage in a ship of the United States Navy, it concentrates on a matter then being agitated, flogging as an official punishment in the Navy. But this leads afield from the problem of evil.

After publishing three books in eleven months, Herman Melville apparently found himself with enough sea room to pile on full sail, if I may borrow his sea symbol for a moment. During the next twenty-two months the problems of moral navigation involved in *Moby Dick* seem to have occupied his attention. He was reading voraciously, testing his own observations of evil and his own speculations concerning its origin against the opinions of others.

How could one determined to find the truth account for the fact that man's affairs so often go wrong? Melville's Calvinistic background gave him one answer in the doctrine of original sin; as every New England Puritan child learned with his letter *A* in the *New England Primer*, "In Adam's fall we sinned all." In a book review written in the summer of 1850 Melville referred to "that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance."¹⁰ Yet it must have been difficult for Melville, with his strong democratic bias (demonstrated all through his work) to accept Adam's fall as a final decree. How could he honor a God who would damn the whole human race for eternity because of Adam's one act of disobedience? For this was the same Melville who wrote jestingly to his friend Hawthorne in June of 1851, "You perceive I employ a capital initial in the pronoun referring to the Deity; don't you think there is a slight dash of flunkeyism in that usage?"¹¹ Melville was determined to get at the whole

truth, the "usable truth," which he defined in another letter to Hawthorne in March of the same year as "the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him,—the man who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists he insists upon treating with all Powers upon an equal basis."¹²

Getting at this "usable truth," in Melville's state of mind in 1851, involved principally a denial of orthodox beliefs; Melville's growth had reached the stage of rebellion against both Calvinism and the easy optimism that he seemed to feel was characteristic of Emerson and the Transcendental group. He writes to Hawthorne:

There is the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says No! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes*, lie; and all men who say *no*,—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious, uncumbered travellers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego. Whereas these *yes*-gentry, they travel with heaps of baggage, and, damn them! they will never get through the Custom House. What's the reason, Mr. Hawthorne, that in the last stages of metaphysics a fellow always falls to *swearing* so? I could rip an hour.¹³

It is quite obvious that beneath this youthful jesting there are strong feelings. *Moby Dick* was a kind of purge of these feelings.

Everyone knows the story of *Moby Dick*. We give the book to high school and even grade school children to read, just as we give them *Gulliver's Travels*. On the story level, *Moby Dick* is a great yarn of adventure at sea, backed up by a thousand accurate details of the romantic occupation of whaling. A boy called Ishmael, who tells the story, puts out to sea on a

whaling voyage. After they have had several encounters with whales, Captain Ahab dramatically announces to the crew the real purpose of the cruise: his sole thought is to revenge himself upon Moby Dick, a great white whale of legendary size and ferocity that has on an earlier voyage bitten off one of the captain's legs. After rounding the Horn and meeting many terrors and wonders of the sea, they at last engage the white whale in a terrific three day fight, which results in the destruction of the ship and the death of Captain Ahab and all of the crew except Ishmael, who escapes by chance.

Now if this were the whole book, *Moby Dick* would be only a somewhat more exciting *Two Years before the Mast*. What is the difference between these two books? The difference, I believe, lies in the different purposes of Dana and Melville, more specifically in Melville's concern with the problem of evil.

For the great white whale is not just a whale; he is also a symbol. This sea voyage is not just a physical adventure; growing out of the physical but vividly welded to it is an intellectual adventure even more vast than the sea, the ship, and the whale. The symbolic method for which Melville had been fumbling in *Mardi*, his last serious book, is achieved in *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab "at last," says Melville

came to identify with him [Moby Dick], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all

that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.¹⁴

The whale shades imperceptibly from a vividly terrible real animal into a personification of all evil.

By a still more subtle process, too complex to describe here, Melville contrives to identify the whale with God himself. Ahab, like Melville, continues to ask why. He traces the evil back to its only possible source in the Christian tradition. Orthodoxy in Western theology had always branded as heresy the notion that Evil was a force outside of God. If God is omnipotent, Evil can exist only by his permission, could be banished instantly if God wished. Thus, God is responsible for the presence of Evil in the world. Ahab, in his monomania, is impelled to strike back at Evil, not merely a particular individual evil like the loss of a leg, but at Evil with a capital E, the very source of evil. The captain explains to his first mate:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the White Whale agent, or be the White Whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me.¹⁵

Here is the very crux of the problem of evil, and here, at last, is real tragedy.

Melville and the Problem of Evil 95

The antagonist is an inscrutable Fate, in the form of a whale, of all evil, of God himself. And the protagonist, Captain Ahab, is a worthy one. Ahab, like all the great heroes of tragedy since the Greeks, is a complex figure, noble, tortured, doomed to destruction by his tragic flaw, his pride. As you watch Ahab's gradual realization that he cannot strike back, that his very defiance, which had seemed so noble, is pre-ordained, and as you watch the eternal sea pour over captain, crew, and ship, you are stirred to pity and terror, which Aristotle pointed out to be the emotions produced by true tragedy.

The critical reception of *Moby Dick* was what might have been expected. Most reviewers simply did not understand it, and it is only fair to say in their defence that it has been persistently misunderstood to this day. While they were impressed by the powerful writing in *Moby Dick*, they felt that Melville had let them down; they had him typed as the author of *White Jacket*, of *Typee*, of pleasant stories with an element of reform. Most of them were simply not prepared to grapple with the problem of evil.

Melville himself must have feared such a reception. It is quite clear that he regarded *Moby Dick* as his most serious work thus far, that he had as it were collected himself for one mighty effort. During its composition he was painfully aware of the impossibility of reconciling serious literary work and popular sales. In 1851 he wrote: "Dollars damn me; and the malicious devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar . . . What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches."¹⁶ And again, "But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth—and go to the Soup Societies. Heavens! Let any clergyman try to

preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit bannister."¹⁷

After the book was published, he wrote a wonderful, exuberant letter to Hawthorne. He says, "A sense of unspeakable security is in me at this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb . . ." He concludes, "Lord, when shall we be done growing? As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing. So, now, let us add *Moby Dick* to our blessing, and step from that. Leviathan is not the biggest fish;—I have heard of Krakens."¹⁸

Thus, he stepped on to his next book, *Pierre*, which did in a way turn out to be that fabulous Scandinavian sea monster, the kraken. *Pierre* is also, at bottom, if one can find a bottom, based on the problem of evil. But where *Moby Dick* had been a clear cut struggle of man against fate, going down to a predictable but somehow glorious defeat, *Pierre* is not so straightforward. Its subtitle, *The Ambiguities*, suggests the approach. Here the author attempts to study something that had puzzled him since he first saw the missionaries in the South Pacific. How is it that so often man's attempt to do good seems to be the very thing that brings forth evil? This basic ambiguity in life obviously leads straight to the problem of evil.

Here is the story: Pierre Glendinning, only son of a doting mother, whom he idolizes along with the memory of his dead father, and heir to the vast ancestral estate of Saddle Meadows along the Hudson, is engaged to marry Lucy Tartan. The future seems to hold for him nothing but beauty and wealth, when suddenly he meets a poverty-stricken girl named Isabel, who reveals to him that she is his half-sister, the illegitimate daughter of his sainted father. His initial

reaction is, of course, one of profound disillusionment. Then comes the question of what to do. How can he correct the wrong that has been done to this poor girl? She needs not only money but also the love of a brother, he feels, for Pierre is an idealist; and he must give her these things without revealing his father's dark secret to his mother. In desperation he makes a plan; he rejects the fair Lucy and pretends that he has married Isabel, hoping by this self-sacrifice to be able to be with his half-sister and act the part of a brother to her. His mother immediately disinherits him, and he and Isabel flee to New York, accompanied by another outcast, a neighboring farm girl who has borne an illegitimate child. In New York, penniless and rejected by his friends, Pierre tries desperately to write a novel and the strain of his situation ruins his health. To his horror he discovers that he feels toward Isabel passions that are hardly brotherly. At this point, the rejected Lucy turns up and announces that she has come to live as a sister with Pierre and his supposed wife. The resulting ménage is surely the maddest household in American literature. Finally, driven to desperation by his accumulated misfortunes, Pierre shoots his cousin Glen, who, as a suitor for the hand of Lucy, has been hounding him. In prison that evening Pierre is visited by Lucy and Isabel. Lucy, still believing that Pierre and Isabel are married, falls dead from shock when she discovers that Isabel is really Pierre's sister, and Pierre and Isabel take poison and die. Pierre, trying to do what seems to him right, brings destruction to those he loves and dies himself, as he says, "the fool of Truth, the fool of Virtue, the fool of Fate."¹⁹

Pierre is, of course, in some ways a ridiculous book, but it is a fascinating one. Here all sorts of hidden themes, taboo in Victorian literature and rare in Melville's work—incest, the Oedipus complex, even a suggestion of homosexuality—

writhe their way to the surface out of Melville's subconscious. Biographers, reading in various autobiographical interpretations, have butchered facts to make a Freudian holiday. Here, however, we are concerned with only one phase of the book.

Melville is still intent upon the problem of evil. Here he probes deep into the basic ambiguity of Good and Evil. How can good produce evil? Halfway through the novel Melville discusses an imaginary tract that Pierre reads, a tract that concludes that "in things terrestrial . . . a man must not be governed by ideas celestial . . .,"²⁰ that ideal virtue is impossible on the earth, and that "a virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is indeed the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them."²¹ On this conclusion Melville comments, "For to me it seems more the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself."²² A virtuous expediency is no solution for the problem of evil.

As the book is conceived, it is obviously a variation of the Hamlet theme—a young man is suddenly faced by an awareness of corruption and in his attempt to act brings down catastrophe on himself and others. The tragic materials are there; here is a conflict with Fate in which the protagonist goes down to destruction. Why then is *Pierre* an artistic failure? Why does the pile of corpses at the end produce in the reader only the emotion of laughter, rather than the real catharsis, the purging of the emotions that is engendered by *Hamlet*?

The principal reason, I believe, is that Melville makes Pierre hopeless. His struggle with Fate is never lighted by his belief in his own possible success. In tragedy Fate must win, of course, but the protagonist must also win some glory, even

Melville and the Problem of Evil 99

in defeat. It is only at the very end of *Moby Dick* that Captain Ahab realizes completely that his fight has been from the beginning doomed; even when the realization comes to him at the end of the third day's struggle, he hurls his final harpoon in defiance and by his courage rescues some value out of the general chaos. In *Pierre* there is nothing comparable and thus no real tragic emotion. The hero simply sinks deeper and deeper until the very terms *good* and *evil* have lost their meaning.

Pierre's attitude seems clearly to reflect that of Melville, who makes him say, "If to follow Virtue to her uttermost vista, where common souls never go; if by that I take hold on hell, and the uttermost virtue, after all, prove but a betraying pander to the monstrousest vice,—then close in and crush me, ye stony walls, and into one gulf let all things tumble together!"²³ One can safely generalize, I believe, that tragedy does not spring from such complete despair. In 1856 Melville visited his old friend briefly in England. Hawthorne reports a conversation that indicates Melville's attitude during these years:

Melville as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.²⁴

In *Pierre* he dropped the plummet deeper into the well of speculation than perhaps at any other time, and his failure to

find soundings there seems to have produced a profound spiritual and emotional crisis. He *had* gone in quest of the kraken—and the kraken had won. His wife wrote, “We all felt anxious about the strain on his health in the spring of 1853.”²⁵ But the gods denied him the plea expressed in *Mardi*: “Better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals; and give me, ye gods, an utter wreck, if wreck I do.” Though close to the rocks, he was saved to float for years on the vulgar shoals he had detested. And in remaining afloat he perhaps demonstrated a greater nobility of character than the immature Melville of 1849 could have understood.

Pierre was, of course, unanimously condemned by the critics, and the two books that followed were almost unnoticed by American journals. The next book was *Israel Potter*, published in 1855 after serialization in *Putnam's*. This is a good historical novel, the story of a Revolutionary soldier who is captured and taken to England as a prisoner; various misadventures prevent his return to America for some forty years, until finally he returns only to die. Melville has obviously departed from the tremendous theme of the problem of evil, but his emphasis here is still relevant to our survey of his growth. For in *Israel Potter* and in many of the shorter pieces written about the same time his themes are obscurity and anonymity, especially the “obscure anonymous heroism of life.” As Professor Sedgwick has written, “His imagination had the virility,” after his own defeat, “to see heroism in a wholly new perspective and to recognize it when divorced from all heroic events and circumstances.”²⁶

In *The Piazza Tales*, however, a collection of short prose pieces published in 1856, there is one story, “Benito Cereno,” in which Melville does return directly to the problem of evil. It is significant, I think, that this is the only short story that

Melville and the Problem of Evil 101

has been placed by most recent critics with his very best work; at least one competent critic has called it the finest short story ever written. The problem of evil seems not only to have been the magnet that drew Melville; within its strange field he was several times stimulated to higher levels of artistry than elsewhere.

The story of "Benito Cereno," like indeed these other stories of Melville, is simple. Its greatness lies in the consummate artistry of its expression of a profound theme, the vivid vitalization of eternal abstractions. Off the coast of Chile Captain Amasa Delano of a Yankee vessel meets a Spanish slave ship in obvious distress. He boards her and learns of her sufferings from storm and disease and her present shortage of water. In his conversations with her captain, Don Benito Cereno, he becomes suspicious; he is oppressed by an intangible feeling that something more than has been told him is wrong on the Spanish ship, and he muses over something obscure in the relations between the Spanish captain and his apparently devoted black body-servant, Babo. Yet he understands nothing until, as he is in his own boat bidding farewell to Don Benito, the Spanish captain suddenly jumps over the side and into the Yankee boat, followed by Babo, who aims a dagger at Don Benito's heart. It is revealed that the slaves, under the leadership of the deceptive Babo, have revolted and seized the Spanish ship and that all that has happened since Delano came aboard has been carefully staged to prevent his learning the truth.

The technique of developing suspense and atmosphere is masterful, and, as you may have suspected, every detail is chosen to illuminate broader meanings. In interpretation here I draw freely upon a study of the story published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* by Professor Stanley Williams of Yale. Let us look at the three principal characters. Babo, the

slave leader, is an Iago-like study in pure evil, the primitive blackness which rises to gain the upper hand over the institutions of the past. For Don Benito is carefully identified with the ancient institutions of state and church. In the presence of this very spirit of evil he becomes powerless. On the other hand, and here is our main point, his speculations on the nature of evil are more mature, more profound than the reactions of the matter-of-fact American, Captain Delano. As Mr. Williams says,

In the presence of evil Delano is uncomprehending until that evil becomes visible and tangible . . . Readily he accepts face values . . . Thus if Amasa Delano stands remotely for the energy of a new civilization, he suggests also the genial compliance of the everyday mind toward the mysteries of good and evil. Not without admiration, and, perhaps, envy for Delano, Melville evidently regards him, in contrast to Don Benito, as philosophically and ethically immature . . . In showing us the good Captain's illusions concerning evil, Melville underlines our own. As Captain Delano says, the sky is blue; the sun shines; why "moralize" upon the past? Nothing could be more sane, more sensible,—or more shallow. Captain Delano . . . is intellectually a child whose every thought is inferior in interest to Don Benito's introspection on the nature of evil.²⁷

The story might well be Melville's comment upon an American reading public that persistently ignored or misunderstood what he considered his serious work and praised his potboilers; nevertheless "Benito" is not simply a venting of personal spleen. It is in theme, conception, and execution one of Melville's major works.

One more point is relevant to our consideration of Melville's philosophical growth. At the end of the story Don Benito enters a monastery, blighted by his contact with evil. As Mr. Williams puts it, "Does Melville hint that for such spirits as Don Benito, such flight must be, though reason like Delano's shows its absurdity, the only refuge? In these very years Melville himself was nostalgic for Christianity.

Melville and the Problem of Evil 103

For Christianity's answer, as Melville had admitted in 'Mardi,' was not easily brushed aside; it had something worth saying concerning the problem of evil which, after all, is the inner theme of 'Benito Cereno.'"²⁸ Melville had passed the apex of his great quest and was now willing to consider solutions which in his youthful impatience he had brushed aside.

The Confidence Man, however, published in 1857, is more pessimistic, less philosophical. Here, in a wordy, repetitious story of a swindler and his victims on a Mississippi steamer, Melville transfers his distrust of the creator to the created, man. The characters in the book are all either shrewd and vicious or innocent, stupid, and gullible. Melville is never uninteresting, for there is an electric mental vigor behind all of his work, but here he is almost unreadable. *The Confidence Man* is at the opposite pole from great tragedy.

This was the last prose published by Melville during his lifetime. I hurry over the next thirty years, full of interest to the biographer and the psychologist, but as yet incompletely studied. Melville, his early reputation forgotten, buried in the anonymity of an obscure customs house job, remained silent, but still thinking, still studying.

He did publish quietly several volumes of poems, which were unnoticed by his contemporaries and which there is not time to consider here. I should point out, nevertheless, that one very long poem, *Clarel*, does consider the problem of evil. One cannot adequately paraphrase such a work in a sentence, but one conclusion is that if good cannot exist without evil, neither can evil exist without good. Melville is turning, looking at the other side of the picture. As Professor Sedgwick has said, "His criticism of the nineteenth century may be restated thus: in its materialism it denied the good; in its idealism it denied the evil. In either case it denied the reality of life, and, denying this reality, humanity withered on all

sides like an uprooted forest."²⁹ One reaches truth not by cutting oneself off from life, as Pierre had done, but by embracing life, by realizing that good and evil are inextricably interwoven.

In 1891 Melville died in obscurity in New York, his work forgotten except by a few admirers, principally in England. The *New York Times* commented, "There has died and been buried in this city, during the current week, at an advanced age, a man who is so little known, even by name, to the generation now in the vigor of life, that only one newspaper contained an obituary account of him, and this was of but three or four lines."³⁰

But this was not the end. There was to come, thirty years later, a voice from the grave. At the beginning of the great Melville revival of the twenties, which was to brand him as the greatest American novelist, Raymond Weaver, Melville's first biographer, was searching through a box of Melville manuscripts when he discovered the unpublished *Billy Budd*. The manuscript of this short novel was marked by the author "Friday, Nov. 16, 1888—begun. Finished—April 19, 1891." Here then is Melville's last word, spoken a few months before his death, a novel that has been compared to Shakespeare's *Tempest* in its ripe maturity, its calm lyricism. And here again Melville returned directly to the problem of evil.

Billy Budd is the story of a young, innocent, handsome sailor in the British navy at the time of the famous mutiny of the Nore. Billy, because of his popularity, his very goodness, is hounded by the master-at-arms, a man named Claggart, who is a summary, a symbol of all evil. Finally Claggart, whose duty it is to preserve discipline, arrests Billy, and takes him before Captain Vere, the master of the ship. There Claggart accuses the innocent sailor of planning mutiny. Billy, aghast at the accusation, and unable to speak because

Melville and the Problem of Evil 105

of a chronic stammer, feels himself bursting with anger and suddenly and instinctively lashes out with a terrific blow at his accuser, which kills him. The action to be taken by Captain Vere, who is presented as a wise, humane man, is difficult but inevitable. The killing of an officer can be punished only by the death penalty, especially in a time of mutiny throughout the fleet, when discipline must be maintained. But the captain has a long talk with Billy in which he explains his decision, and when the sailor is hanged, his last words, spoken to his comrades, are, "God bless Captain Vere!"

I cannot do justice here to the control, the ease, the finished artistry of this story. It belongs certainly with Melville's best work. What the story has to say, though, is relevant to our discussion. The wronged sailor—and the story makes it clearer than I have here that Billy *is* wronged—does not fight back like Ahab, does not give up in despair like Pierre. Victimized by incarnate evil, he accepts his fate with courage, understands that Captain Vere is not persecuting him, resigns himself to a world in which good and evil are inextricably mixed, yet by his bravery wins new values out of defeat.

Billy Budd is Melville's last testament, a testament of acceptance. But it is not a conversion to an easy optimism. The evil is still there and cannot be shunned; but Melville can now perceive that one may face the evil calmly and resolutely without beating his head and lacerating his hands against an irresistible force and that in the process one can win a new kind of nobility.

I hope that this brief and superficial survey has made clear at least the nature of Melville's tragic vision. He had two requisites of the writer of true tragedy—concern with the problem of evil, with man's plight on earth, and a great-

hearted humanity, a broad sympathy with human suffering. And he did not give up. He escaped the native optimism that both Emerson and Whitman lived to repent; as William Butler Yeats has said, Emerson and Whitman "have begun to seem superficial, precisely because they lack the Vision of Evil."³¹ Melville passed through the bleak despair in which Mark Twain ended his days, but Melville came out the other side. As even the optimistic Emerson said in his essay "Fate": "Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it." In keeping his face constantly toward evil Herman Melville gave us our closest approach to great tragedy.

WILLIAM S. DIX

NOTES

¹Radoslav Tsanoff, *The Nature of Evil* (New York, 1931), p. 6.

²Willard Thorp, ed., *Herman Melville: Representative Selections* (New York, 1938), p. 393.

³Herman Melville, *Typee* (London, 1922), p. 18.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵Herman Melville, *Mardi* (London, 1922), II, 276-77.

⁶*Ibid.*, II, 124-25.

⁷*Ibid.*, II, 358.

⁸Philo M. Buck, Jr., *Literary Criticism* (New York, 1930), pp. 259-60.

⁹Meade Minnigerode, *Some Personal Letters of Herman Melville and a Bibliography* (New York, 1922), p. 52.

¹⁰Thorp, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

¹¹Julian Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and his Wife* (Boston, 1885), I, 404.

¹²Thorp, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London, 1922), I, 229-30.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, I, 204.

¹⁶Julian Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, I, 40.

¹⁷Thorp, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 394-95.

¹⁹Herman Melville, *Pierre* (London, 1923), p. 499.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 298.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 299.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 293.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 380-81.

²⁴Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Note-Books*, ed. Randall Stewart (New York, 1941), pp. 432-33.

Melville and the Problem of Evil 107

²⁵Quoted in William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1944), p. 173.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 184-85.

²⁷Stanley Williams, "Follow your Leader': Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXIII, 72-73 (Winter, 1947).

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁹Sedgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

³⁰Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 176.

³¹Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), p. 181.